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Kosygin Out of Sight Since October

The periodic disappearances from Moscow of top Soviet leaders have become routine since they passed the 70-year mark and began to succumb to the illnesses of old age. But Premier Alexei Kosygin has been out of public view for so long that people are beginning to talk.

The pragmatic premier, second only to President Leonid Brezhnev in world renown, hasn't been seen in public since mid-October. At 76, he could be suffering from the major illnesses that have been mentioned in Moscow as the reason for his absence. But there are festering suspicions that Kosygin's illness may have political complications. The word has leaked out that his son-in-law, Dzherman Gvishiani, accepted payoffs from an American mystery man named David Karr.

There's no longer any reason to withhold the fact that Karr used to bring me information from inside the Kremlin. His reports invariably turned out to be reliable. Sometimes he tipped me off to Kremlin happenings before our U.S. intelligence agencies learned about them.

Last July, Karr died in Paris under mysterious circumstances. He had just returned from Moscow where he kept an apartment. He was accompanied by his daughter, Cathy, who said he was exhausted. She believes he died from natural causes. But Karr's widow has suggested to the Paris police that he may have been murdered by the KGB.

It may be strictly coincidental that Kosygin disappeared from public view three months later. But the connection between Karr and Kosygin's son-in-law has stirred whispers in the intelligence community.

As far back as Feb. 20, 1976, the CIA reported: "If a top leader should go, Pre-

mier Kosygin seems to be the most likely. Periodically, reports are circulated that he would like to retire. His health has been indifferent recently. Over the years, his governmental apparatus has suffered attacks and incursions from the party, including Brezhnev. . . ."

Kosygin himself confided to Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme in 1976, according to a secret report, that the Politburo had decided he should "let new political leaders be seen for awhile."

Accordingly, Kosygin began to fade from the public spotlight until he disappeared altogether last October. In Moscow, diplomatic sources told my reporter, Sally Denton, that Kosygin no longer has a voice in Kremlin councils. His likely successor, she was told, would be Deputy Premier Nikolai A. Tikhonov, 74.